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INVESTING IN PEOPLE

(Health)

EDITORIAL - Killer disease

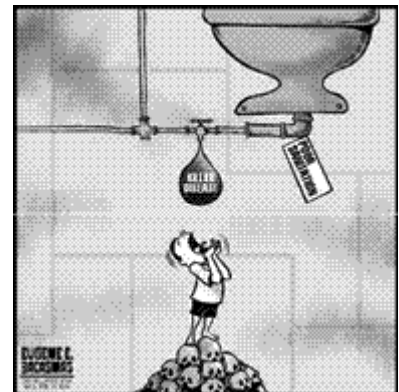
(Source: Philippine Star News Online – 2/20/08)

In the age of space travel and the Internet, a common disease is still killing thousands of Filipinos every year. Health officials have reported that diarrhea has been the leading killer of children in this country for the past 20 years, and all because of poor sanitation and lack of access to potable water.

A study undertaken by the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development showed that every day, an average of 31 Filipinos die of diarrhea resulting from poor sanitation. The study showed that 27.5 million Filipinos — nearly a third of the entire population — do not have sanitary toilets. Only 3.3 percent of urban households are connected to sewers that lead to treatment facilities. Septic tanks that are not properly sealed at the bottom are also causing the contamination of groundwater, the study showed.

The World Bank and USAID estimate that the country is losing about P77.8 billion a year in terms of health care costs, lost wages and premature deaths arising from poor sanitation. The typical tourist also stays away from destinations with poor sanitation, the study noted.

Treating common diarrhea is not as easy as it seems for millions of Filipinos who cannot afford even cheaper generic medicine for ordinary illnesses. The long-term solution is the installation of proper sanitation and safe water facilities. Health officials hope local governments will give priority to such projects. Lawmakers



should also set aside part of their pork barrel allocations for the installation of sanitary toilets and safe water facilities for their constituents.

In a tropical archipelago rich in fresh water sources, safe water should not be a problem. But poor sanitation and industrial pollution are contaminating fresh water sources. Even Metro Manila residents drink water straight from the tap at their own risk. Across the country, cholera cases caused by contaminated water are still being reported.

This is not an insurmountable problem. With political will and the necessary funding, millions of households can be liberated from primitive sanitation, and tens of thousands of lives can be saved every year.